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The Old Mission Church
of Mackinac Island.

Wis. Hist. Soc.
THE OLD MISSION CHURCH

OF MACKINAC ISLAND.

AN HISTORICAL DISCOURSE

DELIVERED AT THE REOPENING,
JULY 28TH, 1895,

BY

THE REV. MEADE C. WILLIAMS, D. D.

ISSUED BY THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES.

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OLD MISSION CHURCH.

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PREFACE.

A number of visitors on Mackinac Island for several years past have had the project of building a Union Chapel for religious services during the summer seasons. Instead, however, of erecting a new one the scheme took the shape last season of purchasing the long abandoned "Old Mission Church," standing at the east end of the Island, and refitting it for our purpose after its original style. This has been done, and on Sunday, the 28th of July, 1895, the first service was held in the restored Church. The Rev. E. D. Morris, D. D., of Lane Theological Seminary, Cincinnati, and the Rev. H. F. Colby, D. D., pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dayton, Ohio, took part with the speaker of the occasion in the services. This discourse aims to tell the story of the Old Church and at the same time of the early Christian Mission which secured the building and gave it its name.

I express my acknowledgments to the Rev. E. E. Strong, D. D., of Boston, editorial secretary of the American Board, and to the Rev. William Jordan, of Clinton, Massachusetts, a member of its Prudential Committee, for their pains in securing important data for me from the early records of the Board. Also to Mrs. Maria L. Chapman, who as a young girl used to attend the services of the Church, and was also a pupil of the school; and to Ignace Pelotte, whose whole life has been spent on the Island, and who now in extreme old age distinctly recalls the time when in the vigor of his manhood he bore a part in work pertaining to the building.

August, 1895.

M. C. W.

The Old Mission Church.

While this historic building, in which we are assembled, is now the Union Chapel of Mackinac Island, I dare say that, as heretofore, so in the future, it will continue to be known and to be familiarly and tenderly spoken of as "The Old Mission Church." In guide books, in photograph collections, in the vocabulary of the carriage men conducting visitors to the objects of interest and in the associations which linger in the minds of the Island residents and of the summer visitors "Old Mission Church" is a designation of this venerable structure which cannot be dislodged.

Old Mission it was—a part of the work of Christian missions in the earlier days of this century. The missions of Protestant Christianity among the Indians of North America began with John Eliot of New England two hundred and fifty years ago. He was known as "the Apostle to the Indians," translating the Bible in their language and laboring among them for forty years. The great Jonathan Edwards also for a part of his ministry served as a missionary to an Indian tribe. The saintly name of David Brainerd is forever associated with the same kind of work in Eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey, a hundred and fifty years ago. In this part of the west Indian missions were early begun by the zealous and enterprising Jesuit

missionaries of the Catholic Church. More than two centuries ago Marquette and others planted the cross in this very region of Michilimackinac, as well as in other parts in the northwest.

Protestant missions in the west advanced as the settlement of the country moved from the sea-board. In the State of Michigan the first Protestant Indian mission of which I have learned was that of the Moravians on the Clinton river, at the present site of Mt. Clemens, near Detroit. It was founded about 1780. but shortly afterwards was removed to Canada.

The "Northern Missionary Society" was organized as early as 1797, and following up their labors among the Indians in Western New York, in 1821 they sent out three missionaries to found a work on Lake Huron. It was a coincidence in the spirit of enterprise that these brethren setting forth in their pioneer work should have embarked from Buffalo in the very first steamboat that floated on the lakes—the "Walk-in-the-Water," as it was called. The vessel was wrecked the first night out, but the missionaries, having put their hands to the plow, would not look back. They bought a team and journeyed over land through the wilderness of Canada and at length reached their destination and established their mission at Ft. Gratiot, at the entrance into Lake Huron. This station was not long continued. It was assumed in about two years by another board called "The United Foreign Missionary Society."* About the same time, however, the attention of this society was turned to Mackinac Island as a more important field,

*In those days, and until recent years, Indian missions, although on our own soil, were classified as foreign.

and the Fort Gratiot mission was abandoned or transferred to this spot at the head of the lake. This was in 1823. An Indian mission was also early established by the Baptists at Sault Ste. Marie, under charge of a Rev. Mr. Bingham. At the same place in 1831 another mission work, attended with marked results, was planted by a young minister of Christ, Jeremiah Porter, who was afterwards identified with the beginnings of Christian work in Chicago. In the Grand Traverse region, too, and at other points in Michigan missions were founded.

This Mackinac mission was not the first Protestant work on the Island. The Rev. David Bacon, of the Connecticut Missionary Society, the father of Dr. Leonard Bacon, a conspicuous figure in New England until his decease a few years ago, had dwelt and preached here for a short time as far back as 1802; not, however, establishing an Indian mission nor organizing a church. Then about 1820, it is said, the Rev. Dr. Morse, father of the inventor of the telegraph, visited the Island and preached one Sabbath. On his return to the east he called attention to the needs of the Island. This led to the Society's sending out in 1822 the Rev. Wm. M. Ferry, a Presbyterian minister, to make a more particular investigation, the consequence of which was the establishment of the mission the following year.

Mr. Ferry was at once appointed superintendent. The work began with the opening of a school for Indian children November 3, 1823, which in the first year enrolled twelve pupils. Mrs. Ferry and Miss Elizabeth McFarland were associated with him in this beginning of the work.*

*Mrs Ferry in her New England days had been a particular friend of Mary Lyon, the founder of Mt. Holyoke Seminary.

The second year it was a school of seventy pupils. About one-half were day scholars from the Island, and the others boarding pupils in the mission family. For several subsequent years the enrollment averaged about one hundred and fifty per year, over a hundred of whom were boarding scholars, being clothed, fed and lodged by the mission family.

The mission was principally designed as a school—a boarding and home school—for the training of Indian youth, and largely with the view of their becoming teachers and interpreters in the work of missions in the interior. The work was not undertaken specially for the Indians of the Island or of the immediate territory, nor for any one tribe. The pupils were gathered from a variety of places about the upper lakes and the head waters of the Mississippi, many of them coming from points more than a thousand miles away. Our Island was then a neutral and peaceable ground for the different tribes, and, as now for us, so then for the Indians it was a favorite place of resort. They came hither in large numbers, sometimes as many as fifteen hundred or two thousand at a time, meeting in friendly companionship and for purposes of trade and to receive their annuities from the government.* It will be remembered, too, that in those early days our Island shared with Detroit in distinction—the two towns being almost the only places of note in the State of Michigan. Mackinac was the headquarters and center of the vast operations of the American Fur Co., organized by John Jacob Astor, of New York. This interest

*Strickland in his "Old Mackinaw" relates that when the Indians of the Grand Traverse region would come over here at such times, they would often be accompanied by their missionary, the Rev. Mr. Daugherty, who kept his tent among them to protect his people in their transactions with the traders.

alone gave to the Island a very considerable population, and that business, together with the general trading interests which centered here made Mackinac for a long time the largest shipping and commercial point in the northwest and made it, too, a place of marked social life. It was also the county seat. So, very naturally, this was considered a strategic point for missionary operations even as previously it had been a strategic situation from a military point of view.*

In 1826 the United Foreign Missionary Society, after establishing the work here and maintaining it for three years, was merged with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Henceforth until it closed in 1837 the Mackinac mission was the work of that board with headquarters in Boston.

It was two years after the opening of the work before the school building and boarding home, now known as the Mission House (hotel) was built. This was in 1825. Previous to its erection the school was carried on in different buildings. At one time three different houses of the Island were in use, one being the early court house of that day. The Mission House was designed for the accommodation of the schools and as a home for the mission families. The contract for the building was made with Detroit parties. They put up the frame and inclosed it, but went away before

*The Straits of Mackinac for two centuries have been the seat of military occupation under three different flags, in the order of French, English and American. In 1780 the post was transferred to the Island from the mainland opposite. It is doubtless the oldest military post of continuous occupation in the United States, if not on the whole continent. It is with great regret that the friends of the Island contemplate the Government's proposed abandonment of this most interesting historic post.

it was finished. One of the teachers, Mr. Martin Heydenburk, had learned the carpentry trade when a young man in the east. He was relieved from school duties for a while that he might work on the unfinished building. He hurriedly brought it to that stage of completion that it could be entered for use, and subsequently, after resuming his duties in the school-room, did much of the finishing work in the interior of the building, giving to it his mornings and evenings and other odd hours when not teaching. At that time, having no church building, the main floor of the east wing of the Mission House was fitted with a movable partition, so that on week days while used for the school work, on Sundays it became their chapel.*

Mr. Ferry, besides being the head of the school, was also the Protestant pastor of the village. Church services were first held, as has just been said, in the east wing of the Mission House. I have no record of the year when the church was organized. It was Presbyterian in form and was within the bounds of the Presbytery of Detroit, though owing, probably, to its remoteness seems to have been but seldom represented in the meetings of that body.

During the winter of 1828-29 a most gracious revival of religion was experienced under Mr. Ferry's ministry. The influence of that work seems to have been very marked on the Island, and, it is said, penetrated even into the depths of the wilderness among the traders. Thirty-three persons were added to the church by confession of Christ—bringing the whole membership at that time up to fifty-two,

*Ex-U. S. Senator from Michigan, the Hon. Thomas W. Ferry, the son of the minister in charge of the mission, was born in the west wing of this building in 1827.

twenty-five being of Indian descent and twenty-seven whites, exclusive of the mission family.

Among the notable conversions of that period was that of Mr. Robt. Stuart, who had come here from New York, as the resident partner and manager of the Astor Fur Company's business, and was perhaps the foremost citizen of the Island. Mr. Stuart was the son of Scotch Presbyterian parents, and had been trained in the Scriptures in his early life. In this country he had engaged in great enterprises and adventures. He had aided in founding the city of Astoria on the Pacific coast, and with a party under his lead had travelled back across the continent. This was among the first of the overland trips (about 1812) that had ever been made, and was attended with great hardship and peril.* Mr. Stuart was remarkably energetic in business, a leader among men, a conspicuous character wherever he might be placed and withal fond of pleasures and gayety and indifferent to eternal things. Whether the religious interest then prevailing on the Island had awakened in his breast long dormant influences of his youth in his pious Scotch home, we cannot say; but the fact was that no sooner did Mr. Ferry in a private interview address him on the subject of personal religion than, to his surprise, he found him humbly responsive and ready to accept Jesus Christ. He united with the church and afterwards served in the spiritual office of ruling elder. Mrs. Stuart joined with her husband in the new step. They were both henceforth closely identified with the work of the church and gave their enthusiasm

*A very graphic description of this journey is given in Washington Irving's "Astoria."

and their strong social influence to the Christian cause.* In this connection, too, it may be mentioned, as another interesting circumstance, that Henry R. Schoolcraft, the great writer and authority on Indian ethnology, and for several years a Government agent on the Island, became a member of this church and was also one of its ruling elders.†

Following this special religious interest, the desire was soon manifested for a suitable church building. Out of that feeling grew this our Old Mission Church. Our good Martin Heydenburk, the teacher who had first been a carpenter and already mentioned as having done much of the work on the other building, was again called into service of the same kind.‡

*This incident has been related to me by two different persons who had it from Mr. Ferry. It is also referred to in the memoir of Mrs. Eliza Chappell Porter, the wife of the late Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Porter. Before her marriage Miss Chappell, from 1831-33 conducted a private school in the village for children who were too young for the school at the mission. She had been invited here for this purpose by the Stuarts and was an inmate of their home. In one of her journal entries she refers very feelingly to her domestic happiness in that family.

†In the records of a meeting of the presbytery of Detroit, held January 17th, 1837, the name of Henry R. Schoolcraft appears as an Elder from the Mackinac church. The life of this remarkable man during his eight years' residence on the Island is specially interesting to us. While enthusiastically engaged in antiquarian researches, noting every local phenomenon of natural science, studying Indian languages and customs, keeping abreast of the fresh literature of the day, writing articles for journals and reviews, corresponding with scholars and societies in Europe and with mission boards in the east, and entertaining distinguished visitors at his home in the "Old Agency," he seems ever actively concerned in the details of the little church; attending "Session meetings" and social prayer meetings, giving counsel and fellowship, and in all ways seeking the peace and prosperity of the church.

‡For these and other particulars pertaining to the buildings, I am indebted to a sketch prepared by Mr. Heydenburk himself and found in "Michigan Pioneer Collections," vol III.

Relieved from school work, he crossed over the straits in the winter with a company of helpers, and in the neighborhood of the hamlet of Freedom, just opposite us, he set to work getting out the beams and lumber for the church. In three weeks' time he had all the cutting done, fifty pieces flatted to be made into scantlings and joists, and an abundance of logs ready for the saw mill, which was situated on the same shore, and operated by Michael Dousman, a name familiar to those who have read early Mackinac annals. On the 11th of April, the thermometer marking zero, a large force of men and horses went across to haul over on the ice all the heavy timbers—the sawed lumber to come afterwards by boat. But when about half way back with the weighty loads they were met by messengers from the island telling them that the ice in the channel had become porous and they could not cross that part. They therefore left the timbers at Round Island, and after some exciting adventures and no little peril, by nightfall got themselves and the horses across the breaking ice of the channel. That night there came a severe freezing and the next day the material was safely landed on the island, and the work of the church building went bravely on. But when the frame was up and partly inclosed, and the last vessel of the season was about to leave for Detroit, the workmen made exorbitant demands (a sort of "strike," perhaps it was, though that name for it was probably unknown); they supposing the demands must be met, or the building be left in that condition all winter. I have already mentioned Mr. Heydenburk once or twice. But he was a teacher worth having, and in just such emergencies especially, with his skill in carpentry. He

said: "Let the men go if they think they must." And he again took up his tools and before the severity of winter had come he had the building enclosed and the steeple finished, and in due course of time the whole work was completed, and the church dedicated. The commodious basement story was at once used for school rooms—this room for the public Sabbath worship. The materials put in the building were of the most durable quality. The foundation walls are of unusual thickness. The large timbers, the cedar studding and joists, and the whole frame-work of the structure are as strong to-day and as firmly jointed as when the house was first built. As Miss Woolson in her story of "Anne," a book redolent of Mackinac, says of the old church, it was "as solid as the faith of those who built it."

I have the following very interesting extract from the official report sent on from here to the Mission Board in Boston, October, 1830:

"The meeting house has been finished and occupied for public worship. The basement story furnishes convenient school rooms. The expense of erecting the church has been borne almost entirely by the people of the village and the traders from the interior, who, on this as well as other occasions, have shown much friendship for the mission, and truly Christian liberality towards other benevolent objects."

So the church was built, and truly a pioneer church for this part of the world it was. It is interesting to reflect that we are sitting to-day in what is probably the oldest Protestant church building in our country between the State of Ohio and the farthest point of the northwest. And

perhaps, too, the claim might be hazarded that in respect to original and unchanged appearance there are very few church edifices—of any name or in any part of the earlier west—that can boast of greater age. For while other old church structures show enlargement and change, a new end or a new front or a tower or spire built in subsequent years, or other marks of alteration, this one in its entire structural form from foundation wall to its tin-topped belfry and from end to end, and in the plaster of its walls and ceiling, in its floors and its weather-worn exterior, stands without any change, the same to-day as when first built.

In those days congregations, large and very interesting, used to fill these pews. There were the teachers and their families and the pupils—the pupils coming in as a body and sitting together. Then there were many families of the village; officers and clerks of the fur company, traders, native Indian families and others who were members or regular attendants. The military post, too, used to be represented—officers and men coming down the street on Sunday mornings in martial step. The soldiers would stack their guns outside in front of the church; one of the men would be detailed to stand guard over the arms, while the others would file into the pews set apart for their accommodation.*

The whole number of members enrolled during the history of the church was about eighty, exclusive of the Mission family. As a pioneer church on the wilderness

*In Mrs. Porter's Mackinac diary I find an entry of July 16th, 1832: "Four are to be added to the church to-day. Capt. Russell and lady of U. S. A., are two of the number." And again she writes on Sunday evening after the communion service: "It is delightful to see the officers of the army with their soldiers enlisting together in the service of the Prince of peace."

frontier it was remarkable in having on its roll and in spiritual office two men of such standing and public name as Mr. Robert Stuart and Henry R. Schoolcraft.

Besides the Mission House and the church, there were also three or four other structures on the premises. These were workshops—a carpenter shop, a blacksmith shop and others. For in connection with class-room and book education, the school had a practical system of manual training. The Indian boys were taught the trades and how to till the soil, and the girls were taught sewing and housework. Two of these shop buildings stood on the opposite, or beach side of the road. Another one adjoined the church on the east side and was the carpenter shop, over which we may well assume that Mr. Heydenburk presided.

The name of Mr. Ferry is the one most intimately connected with the mission—both the work of the school as its superintendent, and the work of the church as the village pastor. He enjoyed the confidence and respect of the residents, and of the traders and of the Indians. As a general pastor on the Island he rendered much spiritual service at the garrison, then having no chaplain, and was held in high estimation by the officers and the private soldiers. During the course of the mission the following persons at different times, and for longer or shorter periods, were connected with the work: Mrs. Ferry, Eunice O. Osmar, Martin Heydenburk, Mrs. Heydenburk, Elizabeth McFarland, Delia Cook, John S. Hudson, Mrs. Hudson, Jedidiah D. Stevens, Mrs. Stevens, Sabrina Stevens, Hannah Goodale, Elizabeth Taylor, Matilda Hotchkiss, Frederic Ayer, John

Newland, Mrs. Newland, Elisha Loomis, Mrs. Loomis, Abel D. Newton, Persis Skinner, Chauncey Hall, John L. Seymour, Jane B. Leavitt, Lucius Geary, Mason Hearsey, W. R. Campbell, Mrs. Campbell.

We have but scanty record of these teachers. They came from the Eastern States and we may presume, in the true missionary and heroic spirit. They taught five days and a half of the week, and held four school terms per year, of twelve weeks each, training their pupils both in book knowledge and in useful handicraft. They were allured by no worldly ambitions in coming out from their homes to this remote pioneer point. Their remuneration in salary we may well believe was very meagre. Concerning one of the gentlemen teachers it has been facetiously related that for compensation he had the privilege of selecting from the boxes of second-hand clothing sent to the mission, he had as many potatoes as he and the Indian boys could raise and as many delicious white fish as they could catch. While, of course, this was not intended as an exact showing of the ledger account, we can at least feel assured that their work offered no great salary attraction.

During the brief history of the school no less than five hundred children of Indian blood and habits acquired the rudiments of education and were taught the pursuits and toils of civilized life. They were at all times, too, under Christian influences, and were instructed in the truths of the Gospel and many became pious. A slight glimpse of the religious teaching of the school is given in the biography of Mrs. Porter, to which book I am already indebted for interesting data. In one place she speaks of visiting the Mis-

sion House and hearing the young Indian girls at their evening lesson repeat together the 23d Psalm and the 55th Chapter of Isaiah, and of hearing a hymn sung "by sixteen sweet Indian voices which was peculiarly touching." As far as the teachers could keep track of the pupils after they had finished their school work, the report was that they turned out as well as the same number of white children would have done under the same conditions.

The Mackinac experiment of mission work, unfortunately, was not continued long enough to show the best results. Changes were taking place which affected the island. The Indians were not coming here as before for trade, and it was becoming difficult to secure pupils. The Michigan lands were coming in demand for settlement and the government was deporting some of the tribes to western reservations. Mr. Astor retired from the Fur Company and it began to change from its former prosperity and magnitude. In 1834 Mr. Ferry withdrew. About this time, too, the island was coming into reputation as an attractive resort for white visitors from below. Thus, for a great variety of reasons the Island ceasing to be an advantageous point for the Indian mission, it was deemed best to discontinue it and about 1836 the land (some twelve acres) and the buildings thereon were sold, and in 1837 the mission was formally given up.

Upon the breaking up of the mission the teachers, of course, left the Island and were scattered in different quarters. Some went to other mission points and continued the same kind of work. Others found homes in the new settlements which were opening in the southern part of the

State, and became highly useful factors in their communities. Mr. Ferry settled at what became Grand Haven, himself founding that city and also its Presbyterian church, and continuing to reside there until his death in 1867.*

The mission given up, the school closed, the teachers and their families gone, the trade and emporium character of the village falling away, the church organization did not long survive. There was no successor of Mr. Ferry in the pastorate. Without a settled minister and with none but occasional preaching services by visiting strangers, the church life gradually ceased. For well nigh sixty years the old church building has stood, for the most part, as but a name and a memory. Not altogether unused has it been, but its use has been only desultory and for miscellaneous purposes. At one time the Rev. Mr. O'Brien, a chaplain at the Fort and pastor of an Episcopal flock organized in 1842 and occupying the Fort chapel, held Sunday afternoon services in this building. The Catholics of the Island used it while erecting their present church about twenty years ago. They put on the excellent roof which now covers the house. At different times in the summer seasons this room would be used in religious worship by the visitors. The village public school was for one period held in the basement. In the

*In the course of years Mr. Ferry became possessed of large means. I learn from the memorial sermon preached at his funeral by the Rev. D. H. Evans, D. D., at that time pastor at Grand Haven, that for more than eighteen years, and until the people were able and willing to employ a minister, he gave his services to the church. He took great pleasure in most liberally aiding the work of the gospel in all the various lines of religious benevolence, and his bequests to missions, to the cause of Christian education and to Bible society work, etc., were most munificent.

days before any public assembly hall was built on the Island it was a place for festivals, and meetings for public speaking, and sometimes for traveling entertainments and performances. Though in all these years known by no other name than Old Mission Church, it has not been possible always to retain for it the character of a church. I think the last religious use it was put to was about five years ago, when the choir boys of one of the Episcopal churches of Chicago were given an outing on the Island, in charge of one or two clergymen, and a prayer service was held here every morning during their stay and the sweet voices of the boys filled these old walls. The building, however, kept falling more and more into dilapidation. But, although its shutters were worn out or gone, its windows and doors broken and its appearance in general was most unkempt, it has been each year to every succession of visitors, and especially to the old resorters and to the old residents an object of peculiar interest.*

A number of summer visitors, joined by some of the Island residents, recently purchased the property. It is held in trust for them by a board of seven trustees.† In repairing it, the object has been to restore it, as nearly as was possible, to its original condition and appearance. You will thus understand the reason for the altitude and the general unmod-

*General Howard, being on the island a few summers ago on a tour of inspection of the military posts, told me of the pleasure he had in seeing the old church.

†Of these trustees two are to be residents of the Island, and five are to be summer visitors owning or renting cottages. As at present constituted the Board is as follows:

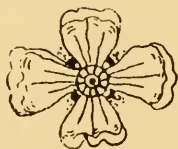
Residents of the Island—John D. Davis, Geo. T. Arnold.

Cottagers—H. M. Duffield, Detroit, Mich.; M. C. Williams, St. Louis, Mo.; F. S. Hanson, Chicago, Ill.; Walter Brooks, Detroit, Mich.; H. L. Jenness, Detroit, Mich.

ern style of the pulpit; you will perceive the explanation of the perhaps uncomfortable pews and the little doors which shut you in, the diminutive panes of glass in the windows, the quaint old gallery and the seating of the singers there. You will understand, too, why we are indisposed to give a fresh look to the outside of the house. There is no ecclesiastical organization whatever in connection with the building, nor any denominational color or control. The motive in the movement has been first to preserve the old sanctuary as a historic relic of the Island and memorial of early mission work, and second to have it as a chapel for union religious services during the few weeks when summer visitors crowd the Island.

In watching the work the other day of setting up this old pulpit just where it used to stand, and putting up its simple stairway on the same side where ran the former one, long since removed, many of the little work-marks and lines of sixty-five years ago, long hidden and concealed, were discovered. Here the outline and impact where a spindle had stood, here a small mortise where some absent tennon once fitted, here a circle mark worn into the wood by the long turning of a fastening button, and here in entire distinctness a scratch-awl mark made for some measurement by the carpenter of two generations ago—here they were, these little marks, still abiding long after the hands that made them had crumbled into dust and the tools had rusted away. And I could not but think of another kind of workmen who also long ago had wrought within these pulpit lines, and of the spiritual impact and marks which they had made. The

truth preached from this old desk, "as nails fastened by the Master of assemblies," made its lines of impress on the souls of men and women which they carried through all their years, and which have passed over with them into the permanency of their eternal state to give significance and witness forever to The Old Mission Church.



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